

BUYING HELP

INTRODUCTION

If you don't know what type of product you need, or are wondering whether or not a particular product will work with your computer, then contact *Buying Help*.

If you want to buy a new desktop or notebook computer, please provide details of how much you want to spend and the type of tasks you want your new PC to perform.

If you're looking to buy an upgrade for your computer, you need to include as much information about your current system as possible. Knowing your computer make and model, processor, amount of memory and motherboard model can help us provide more accurate advice.

Tom Royal

Our Labs Editor can recommend the best product for your specific requirements.

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Quiet graphics card wanted

Q I have a relatively new PC that I built myself from various components. I wanted a quiet computer, so I selected each component carefully to ensure low noise levels. It uses a Gigabyte GeForce 7600GT 256MB DDR3 PCIE Dual DVI S/Pipe 2 graphics card.

At the time I chose the components this was the fastest fanless graphics card I could find, but I'd now like a faster graphics card. Unfortunately, my motherboard doesn't support SLI, so I'm going to have to replace the existing one. Can you recommend a graphics card with very low noise levels that is a significant step up from the 7600GT?

Steve Hunt

A Nvidia's GeForce 7600GT chipset was impressively powerful when it was released, but there are a few faster alternatives available now. MSI makes a fanless card using the faster GeForce 7900GS chipset, the NX7900GS-T2D256EZ. This costs around £130 including VAT from www.quietpc.co.uk, and should provide slightly better performance. Alternatively, MSI also makes a fanless



▲ Gigabyte's card isn't silent, but it is quiet and powerful

card using the newer 8600GTS chip. This is a mid-range graphics chip, so it might not give a significant performance boost when compared to the 7600GT, but it does support HDCP and DirectX 10. This makes it ideal if you plan to upgrade to Windows Vista and play DirectX 10 games, or to watch high-definition discs.

Finally, if you're happy with a card that's quiet rather than one that's completely silent, you should look at Gigabyte's GV-RX195P256D-RH. This card uses ATI's Radeon X1950 chip, and is cooled using a Zalman heatsink and fan system that's bulky but quiet. At less than £140, it gives you a lot of power for not much money.

Digital SLR lens confusion

Q I want to upgrade my digital camera before I go to university. I'm aiming to spend around £400-£500 and I'd like a digital SLR. What confuses me most is the lack of articles on DSLR lenses. My dad was a photographer in the days before digital and, although he has sold most of his old equipment, he still has a few wide-angle and telephoto lenses. I've been trying to find out whether I can re-use these lenses on a DSLR, but aside from some talk on forums there seems to be little information on the subject, and nothing from anyone credible.

I've been drawn to the Canon EOS 400D, but my dad has mainly Nikon lenses. Is it possible to use film lenses on a DSLR and, if so, can I convert Nikon lenses to work on a Canon camera? Failing that, what's the Nikon equivalent to the 400D, and are there any alternatives?

Matt Croft

A Unfortunately, it's unlikely that you can make use of your dad's old lenses with a new digital SLR. Although they might physically connect to some DSLR cameras, there are a few issues to consider. First, you will not be able to connect any Nikon-fit lenses to a Canon camera. If you want to use a Canon camera you'll need new lenses designed for Canon's EOS lens mount. Your dad's Nikon lenses will probably connect to the F-mount lens mount on a Nikon DSLR, but that doesn't mean that they'll necessarily work properly.

Most digital SLR cameras use a sensor that's smaller than the frames of 35mm film used in film SLRs. This means that if you fit a lens designed for film use on a DSLR, it'll behave differently. The smaller sensor crops the image projected by the lens, so it appears similar to that from a lens with a longer focal length. Most DSLRs have a focal length multiplication of around

1.5x, so a 100mm film lens will work similarly to a 150mm digital lens and so on. This means that the wide film lenses you have will work more like a standard-length 50mm lens.

More importantly, modern lenses contain a lot of technology that's missing from older lenses. This technology helps the camera to adjust for exposure and focus, so if you fit an older lens on a DSLR you might need to focus manually, or even use a handheld light meter to choose shutter and aperture settings. This makes taking pictures significantly slower than when using a modern lens. More expensive semi-professional DSLRs such as Nikon's D200 include the technology needed to meter using older lenses, but this comes at a high cost (around £900).

The budget D40 and D40X, which fall into your price range, will work with only the most modern Nikkor lenses. As you'll almost certainly need new lenses for your new camera, you may as well make the jump to Canon and buy the EOS 400D.



▲ Cheaper Nikon DSLRs won't work with old lenses, so you may as well switch to the excellent Canon EOS 400D

Couch control

Q My hi-fi is connected to my PC by an audio cable, so I can listen to music stored on the computer. I've been trying to find out how to sit in my armchair and operate the PC remotely, with a small screen that shows the music files and allows me to select those I want. It sounds quite simple and probably is, but I've been scanning the internet and reading magazines and have become totally bewildered. I am a pensioner so the cost is quite important.

Thanks for any help that you can give me.

Bob Bryant

A What you want to do is indeed simple, but annoyingly there doesn't appear to be a simple solution. What you need is a PC remote control with a display that shows the music files on your computer, but as far as we can tell nobody makes one – or at least not at a reasonable price.

In any case, there are two ways to do what you want. One would be to buy a media streaming device. These connect to your hi-fi and have a display and a remote control, allowing you to select tracks to play. They're designed to connect your computer and your



◀ Logitech's Wireless DJ includes a remote control with a handy display

hi-fi using a wired or a wireless network, though, rather than using a cable as you have. If you don't mind using a network you could sit a media streaming device such as the Roku SoundBridge on your hi-fi, connect it to your computer using a crossover Ethernet cable and operate it with its remote control. The SoundBridge costs around £120, and a suitable cable would cost only a few pounds.

A simpler solution would be to use Logitech's Wireless DJ. This comes in three parts: one that connects to your PC, one that connects to your hi-fi and a remote control. The remote control has a screen that allows you to select tracks, and music is transmitted wirelessly from your PC to your hi-fi. It's a good system, and it costs around £130 from www.dabs.com.

Skype's the limit

Q My wife is working in Canada for six months. We had been speaking on the phone every day, but the call charges were enormous so we've switched to using Skype. This works well and it's free, but it means I have to leave my PC running constantly so that it will ring when she calls. This is cheaper than the phone calls, but it's noisy and the PC is getting hot, too.

I've noticed that there's a version of Skype available for Pocket PC devices, and I think that leaving a PDA running constantly might be a better idea. Could you recommend a Pocket PC that can connect to my Netgear wireless router? I'd only be using it for Skype, so other features are unimportant.

Jason Midnar

A You could buy a Pocket PC to run Skype, but if you will only be using it for making VoIP phone calls there's a simpler, cheaper option. The Philips VOIP841 is a cordless phone that can make Skype calls without a PC. It comes in three parts: a cordless phone, a drop-in charger for the phone and a base station. The base station has an Ethernet port, so it connects to your wireless router via a network cable, and also connects to your standard phone line. This allows you to make and receive some calls via your usual line, and international calls via Skype. It's a neat, well-designed product and at £130 it's cheaper than any decent Pocket PC.



▲ The Philips VOIP841 will allow you to make and receive Skype calls without a PC

Give my wireless a boost

Q I have two computers in my office: one notebook that I use to edit video files, and another older desktop computer with several hard disks that I use to keep a backup of my edited footage. The two are connected wirelessly.

My notebook has a built-in wireless networking adaptor, and the desktop computer is connected to my 802.11g wireless router via an Ethernet cable. Transferring large video files between the two is generally slow, and waiting around is beginning to have an impact on my work.

Can you recommend any wireless networking products that can produce significantly faster transfer speeds than my standard 802.11g system?

Morris Gardner

A Wireless networks are great for tasks such as surfing the internet, but they can be slow when transferring very large files such as video footage.

If you regularly need to move large video files between your two computers, then a wired network would certainly be a cheap and simple way to make things faster. If you don't want to use a cable, though, we recommend Netgear's RangeMax Next Wireless Router and Notebook Adapter.

These products use draft 802.11n technology to increase transfer speeds, and they produced some of the fastest results in our recent wireless networking labs. The router is available in two versions, one with ADSL and one without, so be sure to select the one that matches your broadband internet connection.

I need a new notebook

Q I'm currently looking for a notebook computer with a 17in display. I need one for my home office, where I work on huge spreadsheets and presentations for my consulting work. I don't intend to play games, but I do want a graphics chip that's suitable for photo editing. Portability is not that important to me as I do not travel often. The notebook will be used primarily as a desktop replacement computer, with only occasional trips out of the office.

I have looked at HP's dv9292eu as well as Sony's Vaio AR31E. Which would you

recommend? I need a notebook that runs Windows Vista.

Steve Gardner

A We haven't reviewed Sony's Vaio VGN-AR31E, so we can't comment on its performance. But we tested HP's Pavilion dv9292eu in *What's New: Notebooks*, June 2007. It has a fantastic 17in widescreen display with a resolution of 1,440x900 pixels that would be ideal for working on large spreadsheets or editing photos. Its Nvidia GeForce Go 7600 graphics chip is more than powerful enough for Vista's graphical effects, and



▲ HP's Pavilion dv9292eu is excellent value

it even comes with a Freeview TV tuner. At less than £850 including VAT it's excellent value, and it should suit your needs perfectly. ☑